18.

Successful Writing

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We live in a society that highly values the written word, one that has long associated literacy with being civilized. Writing shapes our perception; it empowers us to share our perspective with others, and is a vital part of persuasion. An old story of a little boy questioning his mother illustrates this: "Mummy," the boy asks, "How did Tarzan kill all those animals, even the great big lion?" "Son," his mother replies, "You'll hear a different version of the story when the lion learns to write." In a competitive environment, words are power and, like the lion, we need to communicate our version of the truth.

To empower, writing must be clear, as unambiguous as a slap in the face – but more receiver-friendly. Unfortunately, in today's fast-paced society writing often contains errors — even on important documents when the meaning is critical. You may recall the 2003 news headlines revealing that British intelligence's dossier on Iraq was based on plagiarised material, in part identified by a repeated misplaced comma. It was not the first time that the misuse of language had played a role in a military fiasco. In 1899 during the Boer war, the English misplaced a full stop on a telegram they sent to their administrator. "Come to our aid should a disturbance here arise . . . ," they wrote. Unfortunately, someone inserted a full stop after "aid" and the army invaded immediately instead of waiting for their cue, with disastrous results (Partridge, 1995). These errors remind us that our writing mistakes can have greater repercussions than we imagine: they may damage our credibility and exacerbate a volatile situation.

How then do we learn to write clearly? In this chapter we outline the features of successful writing to help you acquire them. First, however, we answer the question, "Why write clearly?"

Investing Time

When we talk to students about writing, they often complain that good writing takes a long time. Of course, this is usually true and it is perhaps no coincidence that historically many great Western authors wrote while they were in prison or suffering from protracted illnesses. While

alternative stories abound of poets and philosophers producing literary masterpieces overnight, these are not the norm. Virgil, for example, started his epic poem *The Aeneid* in 29 BC and continued writing it until 19 BC, averaging one line a day. As Klauser (1986) remarks, it is unlikely that Virgil was knocking out a perfect line each morning and then packing up his stylus; he was more likely agonising over each phrase.

Although good writing takes time, this does not mean that the finished product appears laborious. In fact the opposite occurs and we often labour to give an impression of spontaneity and effortlessness. When the French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote in a letter to the Jesuits, "The present letter is a very long one, simply because I had no leisure to make it shorter" (Pascal, 1656, p. 161), he illustrated the writing paradox — we work hard to look like we have written with ease.

However, the benefits of clear writing outweigh the time spent learning to write well. To begin with, graduates with good writing skills are likely to earn more than those without these skills. Most companies spend large amounts of money answering consumer enquiries about documents people do not understand, and so the demand for employees who can write effectively is high. According to the Employers and Manufacturers' Association, the lack of good writing and numeracy skills is a major factor holding back New Zealand's economic growth (Baker, 2003).

Another reason to write clearly is highlighted in a study by Oppenheimer (2003) showing that people who write clearly are seen as more intelligent. Oppenheimer divided students' assignments into two groups — ones filled with unnecessary, complicated words and others containing short, simple language. Markers were asked to read the assignments and rate the students' intelligence. The results showed that markers rated the students who wrote assignments in simple language as more intelligent than those who added numerous complex words.

How Can We Improve Our Writing?

Even excellent writers constantly work at improving their writing. There are, after all, at least one million words in the English language at our disposal (McCrum, Cran & MacNeil, 1992). In this section we draw on the advice of top writers to suggest ways of enhancing your writing.

Have Something Worthwhile to Say

As one crusty old journalist used to mutter correctly, but unhelpfully, on what constitutes successful writing: "If it works it works; if it doesn't, it doesn't." Writing is far more likely to "work" if you have something worthwhile to say. You can have the prose style of a Pulitzer prize

winner and the vocabulary of an Oxford scholar but, if you have only a shallow understanding of your topic, readers will be unimpressed.

Writers should have sufficient knowledge to leave out much of what they know. Ernest Hemingway's (1932) iceberg theory illustrates this well. Just as we may only see one eighth of an iceberg but understand that seven eighths is underwater, so good writing gives readers an understanding of the depth that lies beneath the surface. Of course, if you leave out seven eighths of the information because you do not know it, then this a hole in your writing, not an iceberg. A similar analogy to the iceberg is a window display. By putting our best information forward, the reader gains an understanding of the goods that are not in the window.

To convey knowledge we must be accurate. Apart from ethical considerations, readers will take inaccuracy as a sign that our word is not to be trusted. Check that you have correctly quoted writers and interviewees, be discerning about expert comments (if Auntie Irma had said the same thing would it sound as impressive?) and cross-check material. More importantly, when you have finished writing, re-read and re-read what you have written. Ask yourself: Do I really believe this? All business writing is essentially persuasive. If *you* are unconvinced, you are unlikely to persuade your readers.

Keep it Simple

Saying what we mean as simply as possible is not only good sense, but imperative. A general rule is to keep sentences simple and to present information in a way that maintains impact. Pinner and Pinner (1998) cite research showing that only 4% of readers understand a sentence of 27 words; that 75% understand a sentence of 17 words; and that *practically* everybody can understand a sentence of eight words. This conclusion powerfully backs a journalism convention that a starting sentence or "intro" should never exceed 25 words. Exceed that target by even a few words and the reader's attention is lost.

While there are hundreds of books about writing, perhaps the best advice comes from Orwell's *Politics and the English Language*, now more than 50 years old. He wrote:

> A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly? (Orwell, 1950, p. 95)

Orwell went on to emphasise the importance of letting the *meaning* choose the word, not the other way around. In prose, he says, the worst thing one can do with words is *surrender* to them. Because we can often be in doubt about the effect of a word or a phrase, we need rules that we can rely on when instinct fails. These are Orwell's six rules:

> Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
> Never use a long word where a short one will do.
> If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
> Never use the passive where you can use the active.
> Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
> Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous. (1950, p. 100)

Orwell's wisdom, aimed at the convoluted political writing of the day, might seem to be unnecessarily stating the obvious. Unfortunately, bad writing has neither disappeared with Orwell's death, nor remained confined to the political writing he was attacking. If you apply these rules faithfully, you will find that your writing passes the test of successful writing - the reader will want to read more.

Avoid Repetition

One of the biggest contributors to convoluted writing is repetition. Watch out, especially, for repetitions of meanings. How often do you hear the phrases, "full and complete" or "true and accurate", for instance? Sometimes too, commonly used adjectives and adverbs are rendered redundant when set next to a particular noun. Typical examples are "personal beliefs" and "terrible tragedy". Sometimes, whole phrases become unnecessary. Is there really a need to write: "We decided to make the office walls blue *in colour*"? Do we really need that sign offering "Tattoos *while you wait*"? How else are customers going to get a tattoo?

There are times when it seems impossible not to constantly repeat a word, especially when it is the focus of your topic. But subject names are usually relatively simple to avoid at second or third mention: the "Post Primary Teachers' Association" can easily and sensibly become "the Association". Be careful though not to overuse acronyms as an alternative.

Here a newspaper "rule" may be apposite. Only use acronyms when they are overwhelmingly in common use: certainly IRA; perhaps PPTA; never BIL (Brierley Investments Ltd.). Even when an acronym is

acceptable, write the full title at first mention. If in doubt, accede to the call: BAA — Ban All Acronyms. Some acronyms, of course, are so ingrained in our language, readers might be surprised to learn that that is what they are — radar and laser, for instance. No-one would expect you to write out Radio Detection and Ranging or Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation!

Make Every Word Tell

The earliest known author of a book about writing, Lu Chi, warns writers to beware of overwriting (1991, original 200AD). This advice applies today. At a most basic level, this can mean dropping "commenced" for "started", "opined" (and many of its synonyms) for "said". Similarly, use "home" for "residence", "dwelling" or "abode", "more than" for "in excess of", "sacked" for "downsized".

One of the worst types of overwriting is "*gobbledegook*". Gobbledegook (or gobbledygook) comes from a memo supposed to have been coined in 1944 by Samuel Maverick, a Texan congressman exasperated by his colleagues' affinity for bureaucratese. His inspiration came from the idea of roosters "gobbledygobbling and strutting with ludicrous pomposity". Pinner and Pinner (1998) describe gobbledegook as English gone mad. They give as an example this United States Embassy response to a request from a New Zealand-living citizen about whether her newborn baby was eligible for a United States passport:

> . . . the United States citizen parents of children born at or after 2.07 pm EST on November 4, 1986, need only have been physically present in the United States for five years, two of which were after the age of fourteen, in order to transmit citizenship. This amendment is not applicable to acquisition of citizenship at birth by children born on or after December 14, 1952 but before 2.07 pm EST on November 14, 1986. (1998, p. 56).

Also, as much as possible, avoid jargon (unintelligible specialist language) and clichés (overused expressions) such as "band aid on the problem", "hired gun", "major player", and "paradigm shift". Single words can be over-used and clichéd too: try to avoid "grassroots", "scenario", "proactive", "facilitate" and the like.

Follow the Yellow Brick Road

It is surprising how many writers ignore structure, often just presenting a list of jumbled facts that do not fit together. The literature contains sound advice for writing different types of business reports, letters, and

essays. Depending on what you are writing, you might start from the most important point to the least important (like a journalist), the least important point to the most important (like a lawyer building a case), or in time sequence (past, present, future). Generally, Western readers are not keen on slowly savouring material, and prefer you to make your main point early in the text.

It may sound obvious, but before writing anything, always ask yourself: what is my specific focus? In the simplest of terms, this means writing about a person, a thing or an issue. This focus must apply equally to the piece as a whole as to some of its smaller component parts. Rich (1993) suggests starting by asking yourself: if you had only a few words to express the main point, what would they be? An alternative is the tell-a-friend technique: If you were telling someone about your information, how would you describe it? How would you answer the question, "What's it about?"

Look through your notes, and mark the information you want to use. The next step is to list all the main points you want to cover: decide which are the most important and which point naturally follows from another. Then, says Rich (1993), ask yourself: if you had to test the reader on the most important points of your material, what questions would you write? Put the questions in natural order, with answers for one question leading to another question. When you get to the last paragraph leave the reader with your final thoughts. Do you have a quotation that summarises the main point or refers back to the lead? Is there a future angle? Do you have recommendations?

Just as your article, report, essay or letter must have a dominant theme, so must its paragraphs and sentences. For structure to ensue naturally, start by having the topic at the beginning of the sentence to give the reader perspective, linkage and context. Every phrase, clause, sentence, paragraph, should serve a single function or make a single, clearly enunciated point.

Focus on the Reader

Plain English expert Michele Asprey suggests that the secret of writing lies in three words: "Consider your reader" (2003, p. 79). Writing is essentially a conversation. Just as we would not slowly explain basic information to a person who is already well informed about a topic, or talk weightily about an obscure subject beyond our listeners' understanding, so we tailor our written information to our readers' level of knowledge.

This sounds straightforward, but in practice we usually find ourselves writing for readers who have different levels of knowledge. For example, we are writing an article on body language for an in-house

business magazine. Do we pitch it at readers who are least likely to understand and risk insulting more knowledgeable readers? The answer lies in multi-layering — a technique similar to Hemingway's iceberg theory — where the writer creates a surface layer containing simple concepts that hint at a deeper layer of more subtle issues. This ensures that beginners understand the material, and well-educated readers are not short-changed. Clark (2003) suggests that we enhance multi-layering by placing different sections in the document for our different readers. For example, we can use text boxes or a glossary to explain simple definitions, which the more knowledgeable reader can ignore.

Our focus on the reader also involves being aware of tone — the feeling and attitude behind our words — often called the writer's voice. Through this readers feel our presence. The preferred tone for business writing is helpful, responsive and authentic. Therefore, we phrase our ideas positively and avoid using words that invite resentment, like "terminated", "neglected" and "compulsory", or words and abbreviations that give the impression that we cannot be bothered, such as "etc".

A frequently overlooked aspect of writing is taking care not to bore our readers. "All styles," Voltaire wrote, "are good, except the boring" (1736, preface). Our writing should be vivid and vigorous, especially if it is for a younger audience, as younger people tend to read more slowly. We can make our writing more interesting by using examples, similes, active verbs and concise sentences. However, as we also want to be credible, we avoid sensationalising the material and save phrases like "the management's Gestapo tactics" for Friday night drinks.

Use Actions

One of the most basic rules of good writing is, as far as possible, to be positive. Whether you are writing about actual physical movements, mental processes or relationships, get into the practice of telling your readers about someone *doing* something (Gopen & Swan, 1990).

A simple trick is to use the active voice as much as possible. The active voice is when the subject (i.e., the person doing the action) is at the front of a sentence, for example: "Anna has an IQ of 160". The opposite of the active voice is the passive voice, which keeps the subject hidden until later in the sentence: "An IQ of 160 was scored by Anna," or omits it completely: "One IQ score was 160".

As the passive voice is evasive, it often leaves readers feeling uneasy without knowing why. Psychiatrist Theodore Dalrymple observes that prisoners tend to use the passive voice when describing their crimes ("the knife went in") so as to suggest that they are puppets of circumstance (2001, p. 6). Similarly, Western politicians and the press

often use the passive voice during war ("Tense standoff erupts in bloodshed") to avoid stating that their soldiers were the perpetrators (Harris, 2003; Pilger, interviewed by Barsamian 2002). If you are stuck on a sentence that seems to sound wrong, the first question to ask yourself is: Is it in the active voice?

However, in some circumstances the passive voice is appropriate. One occasion is when we need to be tactful: "These statistics have been miscalculated", is more polite than "You miscalculated the statistics". We also use the passive voice when the subject is unknown or not important to our meaning: a memo stating that "The office carpets have been cleaned" may be more appropriate than informing 500 staff that "Timothy Walker and Cecelia Ansett from Sparkles Cleaning Company cleaned the carpets".

Rules is Rules

When it comes to rules, Frome (1998) observes that good *reading* makes for good writing. He is quite right: how many of us have friends or colleagues, voracious readers, who seem to be able to write immaculately without being able to account for the grammar rules they are effortlessly observing? Things just fall into place for these people. It hardly seems fair!

One of the most common grammar mistakes is faulty parallels. A sentence like, **"**The alliance involves capturing resources, building costs and exploit vulnerabilities", throws readers off balance, and needs to be replaced with, "The alliance involves capturing resources, building costs and exploit*ing* vulnerabilities". You can usually avoid these mistakes by reading your words out loud. If English is not your first language, ask a native English speaker for help.

Another difficulty is deciding whether to use present or past tense. Writing in the present tense can convey immediacy, while the past tense sometimes conveys authority. Most publications have a convention that writing an account of a report or other document requires the present tense — because the contents are deemed to be, if not timeless, long lasting. If a document is an old one, however, the past tense comes back into play. These rules vary, so check the style of the publication you are writing for before putting fingers to keyboard.

Getting the punctuation right is a further challenge. Most people know to put a full stop at the end of sentences, but few are confident about the rules for commas. We use commas to divide words on lists (young, gifted and black). Some people like to add a comma before the "and" (young, gifted, and black). This is called an Oxford comma. We also put commas before direct speech, ("One staff member exclaimed, 'I've had enough of this job'"), and around clauses that we could take out

without damaging the sentence, ("What, for instance, do you mean by style?").

However, we mainly use commas when we join two complete sentences with conjunctions such as *and, or, but, while* or *yet* ("I shot the sheriff, but I did not shoot the deputy"). If you have not joined the sentences with a conjunction, use a semicolon ("I shot the sheriff; I did not shoot the deputy") or a dash if you want a more informal tone. However, too many semicolons can look pretentious, so if you have several on a page, re-write some of the sentences. Colons, by contrast, are usually used to provide the launch for a list or a distinct statement. "Police found in the house: two stereos, three computers, four DVD players and a Rolex watch."

Another punctuation mark that people have difficulty with is the apostrophe. There is even a word — *apostrophobia* — for the fear of misplacing an apostrophe. We use apostrophes (1) to show that a letter is missing (*isn't*, *didn't*) and (2) to mark possession (*John's money*, *Valentine's Day*). If you are using an apostrophe to mark possession and there is more than one subject, place the apostrophe after the 's' (*employees' rights*), unless the noun is plural (*women's, men's, children's*).

However, a tricky situation arises with *its.* You do not use an apostrophe to mark possession in the word *its* ("TV3 has changed its schedule"), but you do insert an apostrophe if you are abbreviating *it is* ("It's easy to overdo the chocolate sauce"). Remember, too, that you never use an apostrophe to make a subject plural, despite how many times you see this incorrect punctuation on menus and shop windows.

If this advice triggers anxiety that you might be violating a few rules, check out some grammar websites, and read Strunk's (1918) definitive book, *The Elements of Style*, now available online. Other authorities include: Fowler (1968), Evans and Crawford (2003), and Bryson (1991).

Listen to the Rhythm

Rhythm is the x factor in writing. As with music, we recognise good rhythm, but it is difficult to say why some combinations are deeply moving and not others. Rhythm is closely related to *euphony*, which means a harmonious sound, and is derived from the Greek word *euphon* for a glass harmonica. Speech writing often contains fine examples of euphony, such as Winston Churchill's, "It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" (1939, p. 1). We can appreciate the melody of these words, but as there is no agreement about how euphony can be measured, it is less easy to bring this quality into our own writing. Even so, there are several techniques for adding rhythm to our sentences.

One technique is to vary the sentence length. Short sentences make the reader want to move on. They build excitement, but too many short

sentences in a row leave readers feeling impatient and give the impression that you do not know how to join sentences with conjunctions. Conversely, too many long sentences are wearying. Flagg (2002, p. 1) suggests varying the length by structuring sentences like Morse code: "long, long, short, short, long, short, long, short" – not as a rule to follow slavishly, but to get a sense of rhythm. Using a capper (a short sentence that follows several longer ones) also gives your writing impact.

When there are several elements to a sentence, place the longest one last. This builds rhythm and heightens the impact. For example, "The scientist formulates a hypothesis, searching for clues and noticing how one characteristic relates to others," sounds better than, "The scientist searches for clues and notices how one characteristic relates to others, formulating a hypothesis". To add more effect, end on an accent syllable (a syllable in which the jaw drops when we say it, such as *vote* and *gold*). Notice how much better "We will endure" sounds than "We will put up with this".

To sustain rhythm, keep the number of prepositions low. Prepositions are those little words that we use to show relation between things, for example *in, at, to, by, up* and *with.* They are the weakest words in a sentence because they do not give us much information (nouns and verbs are the strongest, while adjectives and adverbs are less strong). If you see several prepositions in a sentence, read it again, because chances are high that you could write it better. Also, try to avoid ending a sentence with a preposition, because usually it is better to make your sentences stronger as they progress than to finish on a weak note.

Remember also, that writing is much more fluent when you introduce quotations rather than dropping them in with no introduction. Use phrases like "According to X . . . ", "Y suggests . . . " and "Communication consultant Z says that . . ." to sustain the flow. The easiest way to check that your quotations flow naturally, and for rhythm generally, is to read your writing out loud.

Where to from Here?

Often the difficulties faced by new writers in a discipline simply stem from the fact they have picked up bad habits on the way. Academics Evans and Gruba (2002) observe that most writers seem unaware of their faults. One of their best bits of advice is to recognise your shortcomings and be humble in your efforts to improve. If you are not sure how, or why, *ask* someone.

Frome (1998) makes the point that becoming a writer — he is talking about a *professional* writer — is akin to becoming a surgeon, demanding hard work, persistence and a thick skin. It also warrants pride in the

effort and the accomplishment. Writing, he says, is something done out of choice that gives purpose to life. Each piece of writing is a gift to your readers who, for whatever reason, need to know something that you are imparting or who do not have adequate data to evaluate what they see. "So keep the faith, with pride in whatever you do. Never, ever, sell yourself short" (Frome, 1998, p. 100).

Not only is writing a gift to others, it can also be a gift to yourself. John Ciardi expresses this elegantly in his poem about Josef Stein, a poet who was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp (Ciardi & Cifelli, 1997, p. 225). At the end of World War II – emaciated and half dead – Stein had returned to his old life where he reflected on his ordeal. Ciardi wrote:

> In the spent of one night he wrote three propositions:
> That Hell is the denial of the ordinary. That nothing lasts.
> That clean white paper waiting under a pen
>
> is the gift beyond history and hurt and heaven.

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